

## JAMES BALDWIN'S "A QUESTION OF IDENTITY": THE IMPOSSIBLE COMMUNITY

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*Abstract: It is a common claim that a culture of one's own is a condition for the achievement of identity; but what culture means in the first place and in what sense it could be one's own are questions worth posing. One African-American writer who never tires to ask such questions is James Baldwin. This paper offers a close reading of his little investigated essay "A Question of Identity" (1955) and finds that, in describing a case of self-discovery by means of looking in the mirror of a different culture to see one's own, Baldwin reaches unexpected conclusions on self and community.*

*Keywords: James Baldwin, A Question of Identity, African-American, Paris, community*

### **Introduction: A question of color**

By leaving the US for Europe, James Baldwin may have sought racial invisibility, but he ended up becoming the most visible African-American writer of his time. Half in earnest, one can subscribe to the claim that Baldwin has become what he travelled four thousand miles not to be: a 'Negro writer.' (Bell 1986:114) The young James Baldwin expatriated to Paris to prevent himself, in his own words, "from becoming merely a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer" (Baldwin 1985:171); in Paris he tried to resolve what appeared to be the necessary choice between individuality and collective enrolment by finding formal and substantial ways not to choose. One way, another scholar maintains, was to become an intellectual, that is, to craft an essayistic voice that seemed unraced, a voice that sounded neither black nor white but closer to that of a cosmopolitan sensibility (Posnock 1998:63). The cosmopolitan image of James Baldwin seems supported by that fact that his literary hero, Henry James, cultivated an analogous national ambiguity as a sign of being a highly civilized, trans-national individual. However, Baldwin is no cosmopolitan, quite the contrary. In a Freudian sense, cosmopolitanism is the repressed element of essentialism; although erroneously associated with a position of color-blind universalism, cosmopolitanism is best described in terms of color-curious rather than color-blind or color-bound (Feher 1994:276-7, quoted in Posnock 1998). In what color references are concerned, James Baldwin rather belongs to the color-bound category. In taking after Henry James, Baldwin is forcing a divorce from his other literary hero and main source of oedipal anxieties, Richard Wright. Ironically, cosmopolitanism is a position more accessible to Richard Wright<sup>2</sup> than to the color-bound James Baldwin, and the prevalence of the Negro problem in Baldwin's writing

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<sup>2</sup> See my discussion of Wright's identification with a transnational "tragic elite" in "Towards a Cosmopolitan Community: Richard Wright's *Black Power*" in *HyperCultura. A Biannual Journal of Literary, Cultural and Linguistic Studies*, Victor Publishing House, Bucharest, New Series, No. 2(10)2012.

of America in Europe testifies to that. Baldwin's mastery of the form of essayistic writing, which reminds one commentator of ideal French literature (Dupee 1986:11), cannot be used to obscure the content of his writing; at most it can serve to illustrate the writer's multiple cultural self-framing and, eventually, to highlight the schizoid experience of an African-American intellectual whose racial allegiance may come at odds with his personal dream of individuality.

### Paris and the identity limbo

This tension between the affirmation of individuality and the need for communal enrolment forms the subject of Baldwin's first and most acclaimed volume, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), a collection of ten essays plus an introduction, divided into three parts. The first part of *Notes of a Native Son* contains literary and film pseudo-criticism – not because of its lack of formal and substantial quality, but because the subjects of *Everybody's Protest Novel*, *Many Thousands Gone* and *Carmen Jones: The Dark is Light Enough* are mere pretexts bringing forth an argument on the "Negro problem." Whereas the first part takes literary discourse as its reference and establishes Baldwin's argumentative persona, the second part takes social discourse as its reference and offers three more razorblade-like essays unweaving the oppressive social fabric: *The Harlem Ghetto*, *Journey to Atlanta*, and the central *Notes of a Native Son*. The essays in the third part, namely *Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown*, *A Question of Identity*, *Equal in Paris*, and *Stranger in the Village*, take his European travel as a reference; Baldwin's stay in Europe forms the source and material of the four texts and is important not so much in itself, as (re)placement, but because it permits the displacement and contemplation of the self by placing Baldwin's discussion of (black) America on a European background. This paper will focus on one of the least read out of the ten essays in *Notes of a Native Son*, namely "A Question of Identity", first, because it illustrates the tension between individuality and community so specific to Baldwin and the (African-)American culture he re-presents, and second, because sometimes texts of lesser literary achievement are more transparent in their ideatic and rhetorical mechanisms.

In "A Question of Identity", James Baldwin constructs an argument against the possibility of community with regard to the African-American diaspora in Paris. He does so by offering random elements that could lay at the foundation of community, such as, for instance, military experience, purpose of study, cause of journey, in order to shun them completely in skilful argumentation.

Just like in the other European essays in the third part of *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin delves in typology from the very incipit. This time it is the typology of the American student in Paris that is being proposed: "The American student colony in Paris is a social phenomenon so amorphous as to at once demand and defy the generality." (Baldwin NS:110) Baldwin (i.e. the essayistic persona) offers that what one wants to know at bottom about this contradictory phenomenon, "is what they came to find" (NS:110), but concedes that this question receives as many answers as there are faces at the cafe tables; the diversity of the faces in French cafes will become a leitmotif in the essay for the centripetal dynamics of (non)community. In spite of this early realization of the futility of his question, Baldwin cannot possibly stop after the first paragraph; he has just embarked on deconstructing community and the strategy he employs further is that of invoking, then breaking down

several “assumed denominators.” (NS:110) There is little rhetorical bravery in presenting those arguments that one can counter better, but this pseudo-argumentation must have more of an end.

The first assumed denominator is military experience. It is enough to posit this argument for reasonable counter-arguments to arise from all directions. Yet Baldwin veers into what he, in false modesty, calls a “loaded speculation” (NS:110) and postulates as a first counter-argument the ultimate realization that “it becomes impossible, the moment one thinks about it, to predicate the existence of a common experience.” (NS:110) He then repeats for emphasis: “The moment one thinks about it, it becomes apparent that there is no such thing. That experience is a private, and a very largely speechless affair is the principal truth...” (NS:110) At this point the honest reader is at a loss. The incipit had proposed an analysis of a social phenomenon to the declared purpose of establishing the existence (or not) of the common grounds for the experience thereof; the second paragraph begins an argument but leaves it hanging to posit the inexistence of any common experience; the essay might as well conclude. Yet Baldwin closes the parenthesis and returns to the military experience denominator, which, as stated in the incipit, is yet another question whose many answers are unsatisfying. Then he goes on to explain what military experience is not (experience of battle) and is (wearing a uniform). But the military uniform is common to the entire generation, in Paris or elsewhere and, therefore, bears no relevance. Incidentally, the military uniform offers a hint about the authorial persona: never the bearer of one, Baldwin is only the on-looking assessor. After having presented a feeble argument and demonstrated its frailty, Baldwin invites the reader to take it as fact: “The best that one can do by way of uniting these so disparate identities is simply to accept, without comment, the fact of their military experience without questioning its extent; and further, to suggest that they form, by virtue of their presence here, a somewhat unexpected minority.” (NS:110) This insignificant fact attracts one significant judgement: beyond any possible cause or motivation substantially connecting its members, the existence of the minority must be taken as such and not as the vehicle of a tenor.

Yet Baldwin persists in superfluous counter-argumentation. Whereas the cause of the colony’s flight from home is unfathomable, the purpose is to be dissected: “They are willing, apparently, at least for a season, to endure the wretched Parisian plumbing, the public baths, the Paris age, and dirt – to pursue some end, mysterious and largely inarticulate, arbitrarily summed up in the verb *to study*.” (NS:111) If “Encounter on the Seine” wrote off Paris into an introductory myth of success, “A Question of Identity” has much more to say of the city and will proceed to constructing a demythologizing picture of Paris in the superior tone of the civilized American, through an accumulation of petty details. Suspiciously, this anti-travel exhortation comes at odds with Baldwin’s own itinerant habits. But all that an irritated reader can retort at this point is that one who has spent at least a season abroad for the more or less accurate purpose of study is willing to ignore deficiencies of plumbing. However, Baldwin refuses to perceive the qualitative difference of studying, for instance, art in Paris “since they are studying with teachers of the same caliber as those they would have found in the States.” (NS:111) The argument is not so much false as misfit.

When one begins to fear that Baldwin is preparing an apology of the American education system, the author glides further: neither the quality of educators, nor the artistic

products of the educated are superior to those in America, quite “*au contraire*.” Having posited from the beginning that the motives of the colony under study are uncertain, Baldwin considers it necessary to reiterate exactly the same point, this time focusing on the “student painter as the nearest possible approach to the typical student.” (NS:112) Since the motives for coming to Paris are anything but clear, “one is forced to suppose that they are based on nothing more than the legend of Paris, not infrequently at its most vulgar and superficial level.” (NS:112) Indeed, there may be some fault in the superficiality of touristic attraction and the author hyperbolizes it: what attracted the American student was not love for the French tradition because, the argument goes, “since he is himself without a tradition, he is ill equipped to deal with the traditions of any other people” (NS:112); and Baldwin continues to offer and deny every French reason one might have to study in France: it was not love for the French language, which he doesn’t speak; nor was it love for French history, which he doesn’t grasp; it was not love for the monuments, to which he only brings the “hurried bewilderment of the tourist” (NS:112), and finally, it was not admiration for the French, with which he has no actual contact. What the American student knows is a Paris built in images “that prove themselves treacherous because they are so exact.” (NS:112)

This paradoxical expression of the treasons of representation is similar to the instance in “Encounter on the Seine” when the black sees in the eyes of the European the untruthful faithfulness of his own image. It is the same realization of the arbitrariness of signs, of their failure to translate their referent, the immediate, acknowledged consequence of which is the impossibility to communicate one’s self. If in “Encounter on the Seine” this failure of self-translation was an inter-racial experience, in “A Question of Identity” it becomes an inter-cultural issue, revealing the distance between representation and reality. The image of the sordid French hotel room is inspiredly invoked here as in illustration of that distance: while within the received legend of Paris it functions as a conventional sign for romance, in the Paris of one’s experience it becomes an opposite sign hostile to romance, “once it is oneself, and not Jean Gabin, who lives there.” (NS:113) As Baldwin proposes in a passing thought worth more development, this is the difference, simply, “between what desire and what the reality insists on” (NS:113) – for the traveler has come, in effect, to a city which exists only in his mind.

Baldwin’s criticism of the conventionality of such representations is insightful and innovative, but only goes half-way: eventually he demolishes one legend of Paris to replace it with another, which he constructs by opposition. There is a compensatory function in the legend of Paris as the city where every student loses his head, which makes up for the more down-to-earth excesses of bureaucracy, discomfort of accommodation or political confusion, and the possibility of that legend is maintained by the distance-imposing attitude of the Parisian himself: “It is this arrogant indifference on the part of the Parisian, with its unpredictable effects on the traveler, which makes so splendid the Paris air.” (NS:114) Clinging to this ungraspable mental picture “is the reason, perhaps, that Paris for so long fails to make any mark on him; and may also be why, when the tension between the real and the imagined can no longer be supported, so many people undergo a species of breakdown, or take the first boat home.” (NS:113) In Baldwin’s representation, Paris is neither the city in one’s mind, nor does it become the city of one’s experience, as it shall be seen further; it is rather a “social limbo” (NS:114), a tense space in-between. In this suspended condition, the

American student is allowed irresponsibility and is invested with power: “This is the ‘catch’, for the American, in the Paris freedom: that he becomes here a kind of revenant to Europe, the future of which continent, it may be, is in his hands.” (NS:114) Irrespective of the truth value of this assessment, its consequences are well drawn and ironic: treated as a type, the American desires to be liked “as a person, an implied distinction which makes perfect sense to him, and none whatever to the European.” (NS:115) Just like the Negro’s individuality is untranslatable to the American gaze, so does the American seem imperceptible and typified to the European in Baldwin’s essay.

Yet there comes a moment when, in the mirror of the city placed between desire and reality, the American student realises he himself is caught in the limbo of someone else’s representation: “It is the moment, so to speak, when one leaves the Paris of legend and finds oneself in the real and difficult Paris of the present.” (NS:115) In forsaking the legend, one withdraws from an apparent sovereign position in a touristic story and becomes the object of an every-day Parisian narrative. “At this point, too, it may be suggested, the legend of Paris has done its deadly work, which is, perhaps, so to stun the traveler with freedom that he begins to long for the prison of home – home then becoming the place where questions are not asked” (NS:115). This is a climax in the essay’s critical investigation of the position of the American student in Paris and, by extrapolation, of the traveler’s position anywhere. Baldwin works again by paradox to further the idea that the freedom of the Parisian limbo makes the American student desire the prison of home, that is, the indeterminateness of the traveler’s position can only be temporarily borne and eventually serves to re-establish determinations. Travelers usually know that they leave in order to return, and it is this idea, in a more negative light, that the author expressively conveys. Baldwin’s definition of home as the place where no questions are asked may be the consequence of one’s confrontation with the limbo of self and otherness abroad, where, as argued in “Encounter on the Seine”, the Negro answers affirmatively to all questions of himself but negatively to their resulting conclusion. The unquestioning home is a site of (self-)acceptance, the necessity of which is discovered as a result of inquisitive travel.

This confrontation with the Parisian limbo has two possible results, which Baldwin describes in minute order. One reaction is for the American student to pack his bags and head for home. “His brief period of enchantment having ended, he cannot wait, it seems, to look again on his native land – the virtues of which, if not less crude, have also become, *simple* and *vital*.” (NS:115) That is to say, as the student falls from legendary grace and becomes part of a more mundane Parisian narrative, he gains an appreciation of his homeland as the exact opposite of what Paris stands for. This is merely a reversal of the initial projection positing Paris as the site of desire; now desire refracts back home. While the returnee American student is unaware of the precipice between his initial and current representations of Paris, his attitude swift is phrased in bitter irony and revealed as just another imaginative infatuation: “the violence of his embrace of things American is embarrassing, not only because one is not quite prepared to follow his admirable example, but also because it is impossible not to suspect that his present acceptance of his country is no less romantic, and unreal, than his earlier rejection.” (NS:116) A side judgment follows on what the American student, too, fails to gain in travel, that is, a critical position: “It is as easy, after all, and as

meaningless, to embrace uncritically the cultural sterility of main street as it is to decry it.” (NS:116)

The second possible reaction to the experience of the Parisian limbo is to stay. But the lot of those who remain is, in Baldwin’s assessment, not more fortunate: “the majority have taken roads more devious, and incomparably better hidden – so well hidden that they themselves are lost.” (NS:117) To prove this point, the author proceeds methodically to draw the portrait of what could be called the *mime*, that is, the student “whose adaptation to French life seems to have been most perfect.” (NS:117) The mime’s studies, habits, connections, language, readings, occupations are all French, and Baldwin enumerates them in minute irony. “One assumes that he is living as the French live – which assumption, however, is immediately challenged by the suspicion that no American can live as the French live, even if one could find an American who wanted to.” (NS:117) Again, irony is multilayered: a barb of superiority from the American towards the French, the taunting of the American who goes the French way, a sneer at the latter’s self-delusion in thinking one can, a tint of possible self-irony, etc. The irony accumulates further as this mimetic attitude seems to lack any rewards: “one discovers that, certain picturesque details aside, he seems to know no more about life in Paris than everybody knew at home.” (NS:118) He reads no more into French life than one would read into a guidebook. It seems the mime’s relation to French things and people develops only at the surface of signs, for he gains no access whatsoever to a presumably extant substance or meaning: “in short, the relationship of this perfectly adapted student to the people he now so strenuously adores is based simply on his unwillingness to allow them any of the human attributes with which his countrymen so confounded him at home.” (NS:118) In the end, this exclusive relation to signs and not to their essences (for Baldwin presupposes such essence, in spite of his occasional deconstructive gaze) leaves the student caught into a network of empty signifiers which impresses as “the height of artificiality and, even, of presumption.” (NS:118) Baldwin explains this de-identification with one’s self as a shield against experience and reality, an unconscious choice to persist in legend.

Since very much aware of the typological simplifications he makes for the point of argumentation, Baldwin clarifies that between the two attitudinal extremes of “the student who embraces Home and the student who embraces The Continent” (NS:119) there is a continuum of gradations; this serves to certify the oppositional patterns and anticipates charges of simplification, so the author can move safely to the next, more significant point: “The American in Europe is everywhere confronted with the question of his identity.” (NS:119) This is the common denominator of the student colony, whose diversity is accounted by the different ways of coming to terms with the ontic question. Indeed, the “prodigious” (NS:119) question of identity is vivified by foreign air not only in the students’ or Baldwin’s case – which correlates with the definition of home as the place where no questions are asked. The insinuating question of one’s otherness confronts, the author acknowledges, everyone, not only those “in traffic with ideas” (NS:119), and finds them all unprepared. Having expressed this realization, Baldwin detours into a caricatured stock portrait of Frenchified American “little band of bohemians” who are unaware that one does not become Parisian “by virtue of a Paris address” (NS:120) and which illustrate to him, again in the logic of paradox, “by the very ferocity with which they disavow American attitudes, one of the most American of attributes, the inability to believe that time is real.”

(NS:120) The author sweeps over the potential of this idea by deriving briefly that this inability causes American travelers to misapprehend the nature of society and of experience, and thus to lose “what it was they so bravely set out to find, their own personalities.” (NS:120) By his choice to live outside personal and collective history, in acultural freedom, on the surface of signs, the American student in Paris ceases to exist.

“But if this were all one found in the American student colony, one could hardly have the heart to discuss it” (NS:121) marks a turning point in Baldwin’s assessment. If in Europe the American could only become more confused in terms of his identity, then indeed “it would obviously be infinitely wiser for him to remain at home.” (NS:121) That, however, is not the case, and Baldwin’s exhortation against travel proves to be only a criticism of those who give in to the surface of things: “hidden however in the heart of the confusion he encounters here is that which he came so blindly seeking: the terms on which he is related to his country, and to the world.” (NS:121) The revelation of identity is not substantial because, despite all insistence, one cannot access the essence behind the image, but relational. It is in realizing this relation to his country and the world that the American student in Paris can achieve a sense of himself. This happens against the false assumption, as Baldwin explains, that it is possible to consider the person apart from all the forces that have produced him, an assumption based “on nothing less than our history, which is the history of the total, and willing, alienation, of entire peoples from their forebears.” (NS:121)

One may recognize here the echoes of the necessary relation to history expressed in “Encounter on the Seine”, and this time the essayist no longer glides over the potential of this idea; he offers a remarkable speculation on the relational identity of the (American) individual, which sums up as follows: history has created an American people with a unique and individual past, a past which produces one’s present troubling role; this past is the one lived on the American continent, as opposed to the other, irrecoverable past in Europe; the significance of this American past lies not in its brevity or superficiality, but in the fact that “we, having turned our faces so resolutely away from it, have never demanded from it what it has to give” (NS:121); when abroad, the American is forced to claim his past for otherwise he has no identity support. Thus, “from the vantage point of Europe he discovers his own country.” (NS:121) This should count as one of the weightiest descriptions of the realizations of travel in terms of identity. When one compares it, for instance, with W.D. Howells’ affirmation that once in Europe the American sees his country clearly from the vantage point of distance, one must acknowledge that Baldwin employs the same authoritative tone as Howells, the Dean of American letters, but also displays a subtlety of a different, tenser order.

Whereas in “Encounter on the Seine” Baldwin exercises a transitional style to the point of irritation, juxtaposing thoughts and portraits in an ideatic jump on stepping stones to nowhere, in “A Question of Identity” he delves, on the same Parisian background, into the investigation of exactly what the title proposes: a question of identity and its tentative answers. He does so by drawing a disillusioning, picturesque portrait of the American in Paris, a type that can open up to signify any foreigner, anywhere. Critics have charged Baldwin with not going full length and, indeed, the last paragraph in the essay suspends in a positive note the final implications of the self-discovery for the (African-)American: “And this is a discovery which not only brings to an end the alienation of the American from

himself, but which also makes clear to him, for the first time, the extent of his involvement in the life of Europe.” (NS:122) The vagueness of the discovery and the abstract nature of its result, to the end of which no methodology is given, may be disappointing, but that is only because it puts a temporary end to Baldwin’s rhetorical whirlwind.

### **Conclusion: The other within**

In order to bring his individual and collective identities to a common purpose, Baldwin aims at locating himself, as clarified in *Notes of a Native Son*, “within a specific inheritance and to use that inheritance, precisely, to claim the birthright from which that inheritance had so brutally and specifically excluded me” (Baldwin 1963:12). In his time, he culturally consecrated the competing racial claims of (black) inheritance and (American) birthright, the former limited and limiting, the latter vast and boundless, as the access gate to the “kingdom of culture,” in W.E.B. Du Bois’ words. However, a number of figures in the post-Harlem Renaissance made their way to the kingdom of culture through other gates than James Baldwin, by constructing a significantly different relation to their roots. Charles Johnson, for instance, affirmed polemically that “all knowledge, all disclosure, all revelation from the past, from our predecessors, black, white, and otherwise, is our inheritance... Any sense that other human beings have made out of the world... all that is what we have inherited as human beings” (Johnson 1993:66); hence there is no striving to enter the kingdom of culture, for one is already in residence. Nevertheless, while in historical hindsight Baldwin’s troubled black dialectic of birthright and inheritance may prove less relevant (Posnock 1998:19), it continues to provide an idiosyncratic insight into what could be the mirror stage in the formation of (African-)American identity: the recognition of the other (within). Even progressive intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance “never really understood the importance of black history and culture to the United States” and did not regard “the relationship between whites and blacks as central to the story of the republic” (Hutchinson 1995:446-7); the white immigrant and frontier experiences were central to an Americanism unaware of the centrality of the self-other confrontation in its emergence. It took James Baldwin to highlight, in prophetic rhetoric, the role of the white-black dialectic in the making of an American identity.

Consequently, James Baldwin has often been said, in accusatory tone, to speak mostly to a white readership, and that is true in the sense that the message he conveys is shaped for both white and black ears: Baldwin’s colored rhetoric aims at demonstrating that the identity crisis of the Negro is a crisis of the whole America. In Baldwin’s essays, the question of color identity comes to pose the deepest epistemic and ontic questions not only to the African-American, nor only to the black writer who flees to Paris, but also to his apparently sheltered white readers, pushed out of what Butterfield calls their “tragic innocence.” Americans who are ignorant of black identity are ignorant of their own, concludes Butterfield, much like Baldwin himself (Butterfield 1974:187).

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